

Depot transfer set for Dec. 1, one hurdle left to clear

Protection of cultural and historical resources is the last major hurdle to clear

By **JADE McDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

After years of delays on transferring the former Umatilla Chemical Depot to local control, Columbia Development Authority director Greg Smith believes the project could be just a few months away from the finish line.

"We've set a hard deadline of December 1," he said before adding, "The joke is, 'What year?'"

Locals have reason to be skeptical that the depot is less than three months away from being opened to private economic development that could mean millions of dollars of investment and hundreds of jobs for the area. They've been promised "soon" for several years. Smith said when he was hired in July 2015, he was told the transfer was about 90 days away. That was after a previous timeline had set a transfer date at the beginning of 2015.

In the time since, Smith said the area has lost out on many large projects. He's had to tell companies interested in the land — for data centers, rail car storage, factories, solar panels, mining



FILE PHOTO

Congressman Greg Walden, center, gestures while asking a question while on a tour of the Umatilla Army Depot with the Columbia Development Authority in May 2016.

or other operations — that he has no idea when they would be able to buy or lease the property.

"They're gone. They're not coming back," he said.

Other companies will likely be interested. Smith called the flat area where the chemical weapons incinerator used to stand some of the best industrial land in the state. But the delays in projects means delays in job openings that development on the depot could produce.

"Folks in Hermiston, they're not going to hear it, they're not going to smell it," he said of proposed projects that have come across his

desk. "All they're going to see is cars heading out there and coming back with big paychecks."

In some cases, Smith said, delays have come from the Columbia Development Authority (a partnership between Umatilla County, Morrow County, Port of Morrow, Port of Umatilla and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation) wanting to negotiate to make sure the transfer is done right. The Pentagon wanted to give most of the water rights on the land to the Oregon National Guard, for example, despite the fact that the Guard's own study

estimated it needed only about 13 percent. Smith and the board held firm on needing 73 percent of the depot's water.

But Smith and CDA board member Kim Puzey lay most of the blame for delays on the federal government.

"I have never met a more inefficient form of government than the military," said Smith, who is also an Oregon state representative.

Puzey said the bureaucrats in Washington D.C. aren't motivated to work quickly, so it's hard to get anything to move.

"They come in, they say 'I need a year to get to know the

stakeholders and then a year to vision,'" he said.

Smith and Puzey said the CDA needs the help of their Congressional delegation to give the Army bureaucrats a push. Puzey said Rep. Greg Walden, in particular, is navigating through some tricky political circumstances right now and it "becomes unseemly for a Congressman or woman to go out of their way to push a bureaucrat to do their job."

Walden has assisted the CDA in the past, most recently with a phone call that helped get the CDA a "deal points memo" needed to get some of the depot's infrastructure projects included in the state legislature's transportation package. He also wrote a letter to then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in 2015 when there was talk about charging the CDA for the land. His office said he understands the importance of the project and will continue to provide assistance any way he can.

Smith has always repeated the mantra that the land needs to be free, clean and come with adequate water before the CDA is willing to accept it. Those issues have been worked through, but the holdup now is negotiating with the CTUIR and other entities over protection of cultural and archaeological resources.

There are preserved sections of the Oregon Trail on the depot, as well as areas

of religious significance for the tribes. A lithic flake — a piece of stone chipped off by percussive force during the making of tools like arrowheads — was discovered on site, as was a firepit that could be archaeologically significant.

Smith said he's willing to work with the tribes and historical societies to be accommodating, either by blocking off significant sites to the public or by taking the opposite route and putting up an educational kiosk. However, the tribes have marked a section stretching through the depot as a religiously significant Coyote Coulee. Smith said he was willing to preserve sections that run through the portion of the depot destined to become a wildlife preserve, but not the section that runs through the former incinerator site that was previously agreed upon for industrial use.

The CTUIR's economic and community director Bill Tovey now represents the CTUIR on the CDA board. Smith said he has been working with Tovey and has had good conversations with other CTUIR leaders that lead him to believe they will be able to work out a resolution.

"If we can get this final issue resolved, there's no reason we can't get finished in the very near future," he said.

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City, irrigation district recognized by state for water reuse project

By **JADE McDOWELL**
STAFF WRITER

A water-reuse project by the city of Hermiston and West Extension Irrigation District that is the first of its kind in the state is being recognized for its innovation.

The Oregon Water Resources Department gave the project, which uses recycled water from the city for irrigation, the Tyler Hansell Agricultural Efficiency Award.

The water being used comes from the city's recycled water treatment plant, which churns out a final product that plant manager William Schmittle calls "virtually indistinguishable from drinking water."

It is clean enough to be piped into the Umatilla River, but not always cool enough during summer months (rivers that get too warm are unhealthy for fish that swim upstream to spawn). A year ago the city started sending it into the West Extension Irrigation District's main canal instead during warm months.

Bev Bridgewater, manager of the irrigation district, said every additional bit of water helps the district.

"It's been consistent, reliable and we've been able to put it to good use," she said.

Bridgewater said the project's uniqueness is probably what contributed to the award. When the district and the city got the needed permits to start using the water in August 2016, it was the first time anyone in the state had done so.

"We had a city willing to step up and get the work done," she said.

Hermiston city manager Byron Smith said if the city hadn't been able to send the water to the irrigation district, it would have had to install some sort of cooling equipment instead. The process to get the needed permits was long and complicated, but he said it was worth it in

order to make sure the water was able to be reused in a way that helps contribute to the area's economy.

"That was a driver for us," he said.

He said from the city's standpoint the arrangement has been working well, and they are pleased to have been able to partner with the irrigation district to make it happen.

The Tyler Hansell Agricultural Efficiency Award is given each year to "a recipient that has demonstrated leadership in the area of agricultural water management, increasing the efficiency of water use, while continuing to support agriculture as a vital part of Oregon's economy," according to the Oregon Water Resources Department website.

Tacos y Mas opens near Hermiston High School

HERMISTON HERALD

Owners of a new Mexican restaurant in Hermiston hope its location near Hermiston High School will help keep business booming.

Socorro and Maria Orozco have opened Tacos y Mas at the corner of Highway 395 and Highland Avenue. The building had previously been used by 395 Quickstop to serve a combination of Mexican and American food.

The Orozcos have experience working as cooks at other Mexican restaurants in the area and are serving up street tacos, enchiladas, tamales, menudo and other authentic Mexican dishes.

"It's authentic," Maria's daughter Jessica said. "They cook here every



STAFF PHOTO BY JADE MCDOWELL

Tacos and a burrito sit on a table at Tacos y Mas.

day. It's homemade every day."

She said people can call ahead to order take-out if they prefer, and the Orozcos hope to get the building's drive-thru up and running too. The restaurant will offer specials to high school students during lunch. The proximity to the high school, where students

often walk down Highland Avenue during lunch, was one of the reasons the Orozcos chose the location.

"They finally found a place that was perfect," Jessica said. "It's right on 395, also because the high school is so close we're able to provide lunches for the students."

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